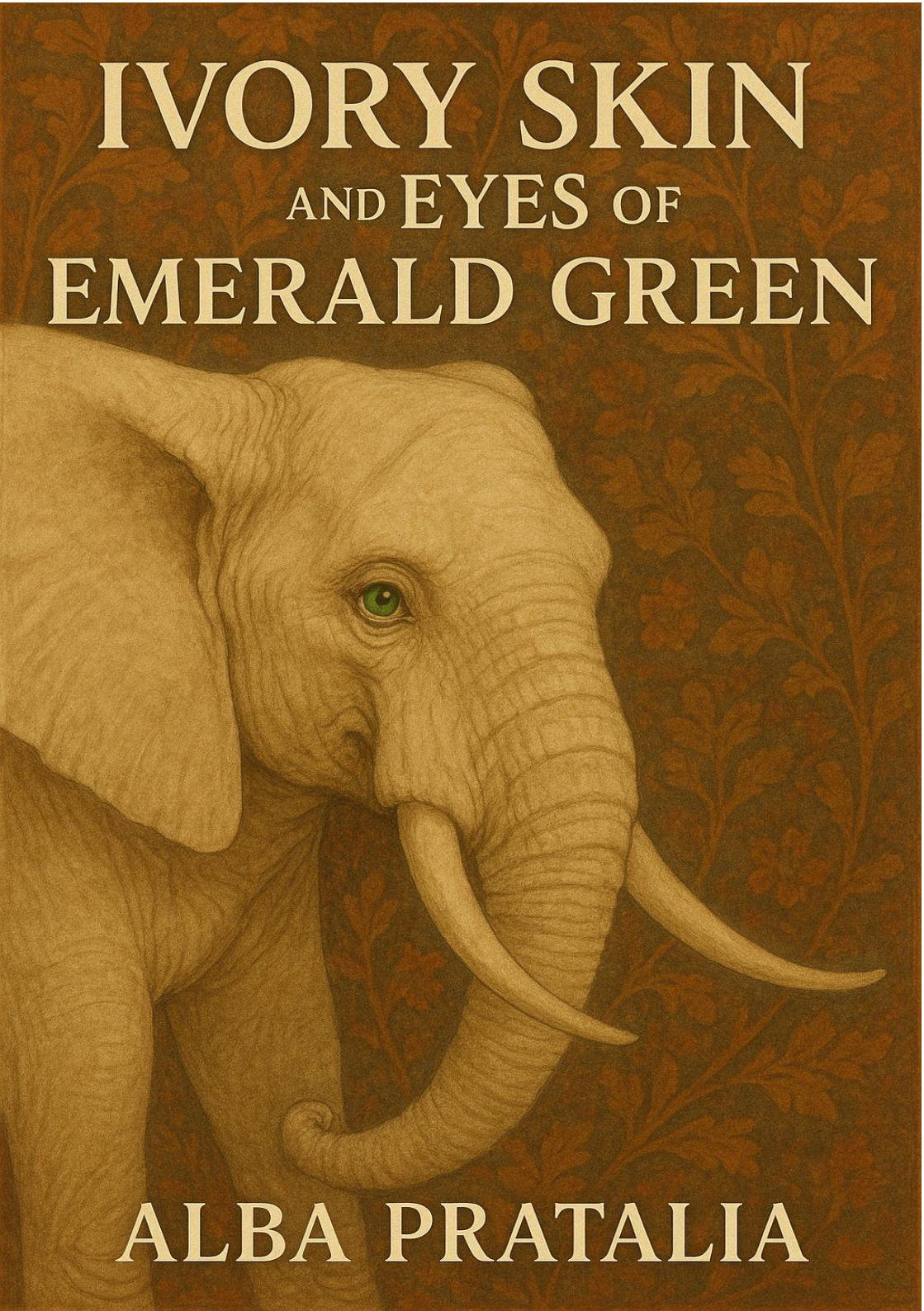
IVORY SKIN AND EYES OF EMERALD GREEN



ALBA PRATALIA

IVORY SKIN

AND EYES OF

EMERALD GREEN

University Podcast Episode Draft

Title: *Were Your Grandparents Sick Nuts? 1950s Rock & Roll and Borderline Paedophilia*
Guest: Yumi Sato (Japanese exchange grad student)
Setting: University Media Studio, two unsuspecting hosts, mugs of coffee, expecting origami and tea-ceremony chatter.

[Intro Music: cheerful campus jingle fades out]

Host 1 (cheerful):
"Welcome back to *Campus Voices*! Today we've got a special guest, Yumi Sato, a graduate exchange student from Japan. We were going to talk about cultural traditions and maybe some fun East–West differences, right Yumi?"

Yumi (soft, polite, smiling):
"Ah yes, thank you for inviting me. I thought…

maybe instead… we talk about *evidence of borderline paedophilia in American 1950s rock and roll music.* Subtitle: *Were Your Grandparents Sick Nuts?*"

[Hosts exchange panicked eye contact. One chokes slightly on coffee.]

Segment 1 – Chuck Berry: Sweet Sixteen or Red Flag?

Yumi:
"In Japan, we often celebrate youth in poetry, yes. But your rock music… it is different. For example: Chuck Berry, 'Sweet Little Sixteen'—anthem to a sixteen-year-old fangirl. Cute? Or a thirty-year-old man drooling over a high schooler? Hmm."

Host 2 (forcing laugh):
"Ha ha, uh… ha."

Segment 2 – Jerry Lee Lewis and the Cousin Thing

Yumi (matter-of-fact):
"Next: Jerry Lee Lewis, 'Little Queenie.' He says: *Go, go, go little Queenie.* Harmless? Except he was actually married to his thirteen-year-old cousin. When I read this lyric, I thought: oh, this is not music, this is evidence."

Host 1 (dead voice):
"…oh my god."

Segment 3 – The Innocent Mask

Yumi (leaning closer to mic, professor-serious):
"Many songs sound innocent. Buddy Holly sings *You like holding hands.* Very pure. But when sung by a 22-year-old to a 'square girl'? It suggests she is pre-sexual. Not yet ready for adult love. Again—adult men, obsessing over teenage innocence."

Segment 4 – The Cousin Kisser

Yumi (sweet smile, cutting voice):
"Elvis Presley. *Kissin' Cousins.* On paper: novelty, fun. But Elvis also dated Priscilla when she was fourteen. So… the line 'tiny little feet'? I do not laugh."

Host 2:
"Okay, um, wow. This is… way deeper than… tea ceremony."

Segment 5 – Car Rides & Court Records

Yumi (scrolling notes):
"Chuck Berry again: *She got in the car / And she sat in my lap.* Later, Berry was arrested for transporting a 14-year-old across state lines. Lyrics + biography = alarm!"

Segment 6 – Marketed Teenagers

Yumi (explaining calmly):
“Frankie Lymon was 13, singing ‘Why Do Fools Fall in Love.’ To adults, this was adorable. But really, you were monetizing children singing about sex.”

Segment 7 – Bikini Girl Panic

Yumi:
“Brian Hyland, ‘Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polka Dot Bikini.’ The girl is described as *young,* hiding in the locker room, nervous. Adult men laughing about a shy underage girl in a swimsuit. Hilarious? No—creepy.”

Host 1 (muttering):
“Jesus Christ, my grandma danced to that at prom.”

Segment 8 – Reputation & Virginity

Yumi:
“Everly Brothers: ‘Wake Up Little Susie.’ A high school couple falls asleep at drive-in, reputation ruined. At surface: innocent. Underneath: panic about teenage sexuality.”

Segment 9 – The Pattern

Yumi (concluding like a prosecutor):
“So many songs: *little girl, teenager, sixteen.* Artists: men in their twenties and thirties. The lyrics stay innocent enough—hand-holding, kissing—but the fixation on the underage girl body is everywhere. This is a cultural sickness. And your grandparents danced to it.”

[Long, awkward silence. Clock ticks.]

Host 2 (weakly):
"…uh… would you like to… tell us about origami now?"

Yumi (smiles, shaking head):
"No. I think this is more important."

[Outro music plays way too loud, as if someone slammed fader to escape.]

Nathan was listening to the podcast while welding a cardan to two axles. Sparks spat like fireflies on strike.

Thought n.1: *Find a grant for academically kidnapping that girl. Chain her to a dozen post-docs, let her dig through archives until Chuck Berry personally rises from the grave to issue a restraining order.*

Thought n.2: *Who wants to fuck a green fruit anyway?*

He let the memory run: back when he was that age—dry humps that burned through jeans, handjobs like someone trying to start a fire without matches, blowjobs with more enamel than tongue, pussy licking that was 90% drool and 10% missed target, orbiting the clitoris as if it were the forbidden city.

Thrusting with zero gain, like pushing a stalled car uphill.
Riding with no rhythm, like jazz without a drummer.

He grinned, visor lit orange from the weld. Because once you've known women over twenty-eight—their soft, masterful capacity to steer the whole campaign from ignition to victory—you don't go back. They finish the business, pour you a drink, and then actually deliver post-coital conversation worth staying awake for.

The bead sealed, the joint held. Nathan lifted his helmet.

“Now *that*,” he said to no one, “is proper engineering.”

Years ago. Their date had been arranged. No destiny, no Cupid—just logistics. He picked her up at the metro station. First glance: nothing special. Not his type. But then they were in the jazz club, frenching between trumpet solos, and she slid his hand onto her breast like she was checking off a box.

Motel room. First round, he shot in a minute and three quarters. She didn’t flinch. Didn’t mock. She knew—it was normal. Later he made her come, again and again, until she melted into the sheets.

When he rolled over, hard again, whispering about finishing inside, she just shrugged, candid as ordering coffee:
“Don’t make me pregnant. Cum in my ass.”

So he did. Grabbed the nearest bottle—shampoo. The holy manuals all scream: *never anything but water-based products!* Yes, yes, demonize all you

want. But in the field? In the trenches of lust? Shampoo works. Believe us: when in need, shampoo does the job.

Another time he befriended a girl by the back entrance—literal and figurative. She claimed she'd never done backdoor before. Nathan tended to believe her. She was tight, raw, and the screams weren't the theatrical kind; they had that jagged edge of actual pain. Shampoo again—house brand KY for the desperate.

She cried about the bus parking, about the tearing. Nathan asked, half-serious:
"Do I stop here?"

She clenched her teeth, soldiered up:
"No, don't stop. Don't. Go on."

Nathan's blood ran hotter. He warned, "If I go on, I won't be gentle."
And she shot back, "Then don't be."

So he reared her harder. And when she finally wailed out scripture—*"Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?"*—he climaxed like a rocket abandoning the atmosphere.

Years later, they each ended up in separate couples, living separate lives. Over a drink she told him she once broke a leg in a fall, bone popping out white and obscene. And still, she said, she remembered that anal night as the worst pain of her existence.

Nathan raised his glass to that. "Cheers. High honor."

Nathan had just finished his reminiscing, bourbon in hand, and found himself ranting not at a colleague, not at the void, but at a one-year-old toddler—serious tone, as if the baby were chairing a symposium. The kid sat cross-legged on the floor, giggling, chewing a rubber blue toy.

Nathan squinted:
"My dog has better toys than you, and more

intelligence than you now—or than you'll ever collect in whatever miserable future life you stumble through."

The toddler squealed, drooled like a broken faucet.

"You'll be a corporate muppet by year eighteen, dreaming of a badge on a lanyard and the code to the Xerox machine like it's Willy Wonka's golden ticket."

The toddler offered him the soggy toy. Nathan, with uncharacteristic grace, declined. Took another sip of bourbon.

"Your father has a rotten taste in bourbon, and keeps no scotch at all. That's why I foresee your future as a cheerful corporate minion who says, without irony, *'my boss.'*"

At this, the toddler raised a cheek and detonated into the diaper. The smell announced itself like mustard gas. Nathan pinched his nose.

“Take care, old chap. See you around.”

He walked off, glass in hand, as a shriek rose behind him:
“Who on earth leaves a toddler unattended???”

Nathan didn’t answer. The bourbon was empty anyway.

As Nathan walked away from the shitting toddler, bourbon fumes still in his nose, he stumbled upon three familiar shapes at the self-service bar: the anchorman, the cameraman, and the mic man. Old companions in mischief.

Nathan spread his arms:
“Well, I’ll be damned if these aren’t my undersack-smelling companions!”

They all laughed, hugged, slapped backs like veterans reunited in a trench.

Nathan squinted:
“What are you degenerates doing here?”

Anchorman (mouth full of shrimp skewer):
“The bride is my cousin.”

Nathan blinked.
“Bride?”

Anchorman:
“Of the wedding. As in: wedding.”

Nathan:
“Wedding?”

The trio stared at each other, then at Nathan.

Cameraman (slowly, like to a patient):
“You *do* realize you’re at a wedding, don’t you?”

Nathan:
“…I was just talking to a dressed-up toddler.”

Mic man:
“Yes. And did you notice everyone’s dressed up?
Hell, you’re dressed up.”

Nathan finally looked down at himself, pinching his jacket, fingering the tie like a man inspecting produce at a market stall.
“Am I?”

Anchorman (sighing, to the others):
“Dear God, fellas. Let’s take him somewhere he can lie down.”

Nathan, perking up, eyes bright:
“…Will there be any shampoo?”

Nathan let them half-carry, half-drag him onto a battered sofa in the corner of the hall. He doubled over like a marionette with a chewed string.

“No, ouch, no — not that way,” he snapped, flinching as someone tried to prop his arm. “My *shoulder*, goddammit. I’ve ranted six pages on a knee I never tore. This shoulder I actually dislocated. Times. It’s basically just hanging from the ropes. I’m a whole broken puppet. Handle me like museum glass, will you?”

Anchorman fussed with a napkin like he'd been promoted to surgeon. Cameraman produced a bottle from somewhere — not shampoo this time, thank Christ — and the mic man rummaged in his bag for something that might pass for first aid: scissors, a tampon (because mic men carry everything), a ribbon of tape that had once been part of a boom mic.

"You gonna be all right?" the cameraman asked, voice suddenly tender in the way only men who've filmed riots can be.

"Define 'all right,'" Nathan said. He relaxed into the sofa enough to look theatrical. "If 'all right' is being able to lift a glass without wanting to throw it at a choirboy, then yes. If 'all right' is auditioning for the hand-of-God in a marionette revue, also yes."

Mic man tried to fashion a sling. Anchorman dabbed at Nathan's forehead with shriveled wedding-issue ice. Nathan regarded the polite incompetence with amused contempt.

“You know what’s worse than a dislocated shoulder?” he grunted. “A dislocated conversation. I just spent twenty minutes explaining to a toddler why his future would suck. And then I realized I was at a wedding. Universe has jokes.”

Cameraman handed him the whiskey like an offering. Nathan took a pull, winced, and smiled crookedly.

“Now that,” he said, voice gone soft for half a breath, “is proper lubrication for a broken puppet.”

Somewhere beyond the folding doors, crystal glasses chimed and someone shouted for the best man. Nathan closed his eyes, the sofa swallowing him, and thought — briefly, with the honesty of men who have known too many beds and too many stitches — that maybe the shoulder could wait. There were worse things to limp away from than a wedding.

Just instants before the Jeeves impersonations really set in, Nathan had already done what every

seasoned mischief-maker does best: made the room look at the moon while he fingered himself. Half his rant was unwanted chaos, the other half was perfectly lucid distraction.

And in that lucid half, he got hold of the loot. A tray left too close, a bridesmaid distracted by her own reflection, a mic man fumbling shampoo theatrics — Nathan's hand snatched bottles and glasses like a magician palming cards.

By the time the crowd blinked back toward him, he had already tilted his head back, swallowing a random, idiotic cocktail: tramadol, Ambien, Xanax — all sluiced down with more than an eighth of a pint of whiskey. (For those who skipped fractions in school: that's more than half a quarter pint bottle, and more than enough to classify as "goodnight, Vienna.")

He sat there, shoulders broken-puppet, bowtie skewed, a grin stretching across his face that didn't belong to sobriety or sanity.

And that smile — Christ — that smile was priceless. It wasn't victory, it wasn't relief. It was the feral smirk of a man who had just won an argument against the entire wedding party by swallowing the evidence.

He came to in a vault of fluorescent blue and the metallic smell of antiseptic, ambulance lights blinking through a curtained window. For a beat he was a marionette with no strings; then he groaned, pushed himself up on an elbow and said, clear as a menu request:

"Would anyone fix me a Reuben?"

Two paramedics snapped into choreography — fingers to wrist, one checking carotid, the other leaning in with a penlight to snap his pupils like shutter curtains. Nathan blinked at the probing hands, at the rubber glove smell, and peered around the cramped box.

“Why did you put me in the bathroom?” he asked, offended and baffled. “Did I shit myself again?”

Paramedic 1 moved a finger slowly in front of his face. “Sir, follow my finger. Do you know who you are?”

Nathan: “Does anyone, really? Since the moment I acquired memory I’ve been running on borrowed answers.”

Paramedic 2: “Can you tell me your name?”

Nathan: “Yes. Do *you* know yours?”

Paramedic 1, softer now: “Sir — do you realize where you are?”

Nathan, earnest as a distracted priest: “Am I not in the bathroom of the place… party… wherever we are?”

Paramedic 2, the tone of someone reciting an instruction manual: “Sir, you are in an ambulance.

You ingested a significant mix of pharmaceuticals and alcohol. Do you have any memory of that?"

Nathan, with the dull pride of a man reciting his lullaby: "Of course I do. That's my lullaby. How else do I go to sleep?"

Paramedic 1: "We're on our way to the hospital."

Nathan, immediately solicitous: "Why? Are you unwell? Oh dear — I'm sorry. Can I help you in any way?"

For a long second the two medics just looked at the man they'd assumed near-dead, who was now offering to assist them like a retired vicar volunteering at a soup kitchen. The driver, over the radio, froze the siren and killed the engine as if the universe had hit pause.

Paramedic 2 muttered into the cab radio something that sounded suspiciously like, *collective mental triage*, and they pulled the ambulance to the kerb.

No needles. No straps. No invasive anything — Nathan's phobias had been briefed like a religious cheat sheet and were being observed with the weird tenderness of folks who'd seen worse and now had to play nice.

They eased him back down, propped pillows, supplied water (not whiskey — this was emergency protocol, not a bar mitzvah), and did the gentle questions again: allergies, meds, next of kin. Nathan answered in half-grins and philosophy, conceding basic facts but refusing to fold into panic.

"Hospital?" he asked finally, watching their faces. "Fine. But when we arrive, tell them to stock the cafeteria. A man in my condition deserves a Reuben. Preferably with pickles that have seen the world and survived."

Paramedic 1, trying not to smile: "We'll make a note, sir."

Paramedic 2: “You’re going to be monitored. We won’t strap you — you said no. We’ll keep it non-invasive.”

Nathan closed his eyes like a man signing an IOU. “Good. Keep it civil. And if you see anyone trying to slip me shampoo, wrestle them for their sins.”

They laughed — because what else do you do — and rolled the curtains up as the ambulance slid back into traffic, siren whispering once more into the night. Nathan watched the ceiling go by and, between sedation and stubbornness, rehearsed his next one-liner for the hospital intake nurse.

The paramedics smiled — a dangerous mistake, because Nathan, half-grogged, half-theatrical, was always rehearsing the next mischief. He let them bend over their hospitalization forms, clipboards and carbon copies fluttering, and in that moment he slid sideways like smoke under a door.

When they looked up again, Nathan was gone. In his place: nothing but a half-empty paper cup of water and the faint smell of bourbon sweat.

He had also lifted a handful of pill bottles from their tray — a sweep of the hand, magician's flourish — tucked into his jacket like treasure.

The ambulance crew held an emergency caucus. No shouting, no panic, just a tight circle of shame.
"This didn't happen."
"We never saw him."
"Blinds closed on this room."
Three nods, one sigh. Official policy: erase Nathan.

Meanwhile, Nathan was two streets away, swaggering like a man in control of absolutely nothing. He found a liquor store — the fluorescent kind that sells despair and Doritos in equal measure — and bought himself another quarter pint.

On a park bench, or maybe a bus stop, or maybe a small decorative wall in front of a dry cleaner, he

uncorked his new medicine cabinet. With a grin worthy of a Roman emperor, he washed down a random fistful of pills with bourbon.

He felt jolly. Invincible. A carnival of chemicals in his bloodstream.
He had no clue that what he was swallowing was pediatric Tylenol and gummy vitamins — the only bottles left within his reach when he staged his escape.

But Nathan didn't know, and that ignorance was its own bliss. He tipped the bottle to the stars and laughed.
"To life," he slurred, "or whatever this is."

And staggered on, happy anyway.

The municipal guard spotted him on the park bench, bottle glinting like a guilty jewel. He strode over, ticket pad at the ready.

“Sir, that’s an open container on public grounds—”
Then he squinted, gasped, and broke into a grin.
“Wait a second. Hey, you’re the one from the interview! On TV! The one who doesn’t give a fuck about his own life but would defend to the death the lives of others!”

Nathan tipped an invisible hat, eyes watery with bourbon.
“Well, thank you, my dear good man. I do not recall any interview, but that thought does sound suspiciously like mine. You’re very nice to remember.”

The guard chuckled, leaning closer.
“Sure you do! You did the undersack-fingers smelling!”

Nathan blinked, then lit up.
“Oh, yes. Yes, I remember that. I was with the TV crew just a few minutes ago.”

Guard: “I’d love to meet them. Where’s the party?”
Nathan: “Party?”
Guard: “You know, since you’re all dressed up.”

Nathan glanced down at himself, plucking at his shirt like it was produce at the market.
“Am I?”

The guard’s smile faltered.
“Sir… do you need medical help?”

Nathan spread his arms with mock solemnity.
“Oh no, I already had the best. Great fellas. Sorry I had to skip out early. So anyway… do you know where this party is?”

Guard: “Well, I was hoping you could—”

They shared a stare. Nathan’s said, clear as neon:
Nigga, please.

The guard coughed, checked his phone.
“Fine. I’ll browse social media.”

Nathan lifted the bottle, poured a gulp down his throat, and tossed a handful of pediatric vitamins in after it, convinced he was downing black-market psychotropics. His grin spread like a grease fire.

“Perfect,” he said, wiping his lips. “You browse. I’ll ascend.”

Surprisingly — in about forty minutes, against all odds — the municipal guard actually tracked the wedding down. He also tracked Nathan, who had only “wandered” as far as behind a bare bush, crouched there chuckling to himself like it was the world’s longest game of hide and seek. Winter had stripped the branches clean, the man was completely visible, but Nathan thought he was invisible.

The guard sighed, loaded Nathan into the patrol car, and drove him straight to the reception.

Nathan, seeing the TV crew again, spread his arms as if resurrected:
“Hey, you original bastards! Where had you been?”

The anchorman, cameraman, and mic man looked at him, then at each other, then back at him.
Anchorman: “We put you on an ambulance.”

Nathan blinked.
“Oh, the moving bathroom? Yeah, they were so nice. Too bad I had to skip them. Anyway, here, let me introduce my friend… Friend whose name is… Well, friend, introduce yourself. He’s a big fan of yours anyway.”

The guard straightened his uniform, blushing at the attention, mumbling something about “just doing my duty.” Meanwhile Nathan, oblivious, tilted back his bourbon bottle and tipped in another handful of pediatric vitamins like they were contraband ecstasy.

He chewed, swallowed, smiled a crooked smile. "Best party trick in town."

And the whole room, for reasons beyond any logical accounting, accepted it as normal that Nathan had simply disappeared, overdosed, returned, and now had a municipal guard for a plus-one.

The municipal guard turned out to be a jolly good fellow. He fell into the TV-crew-plus-Nathan pack as naturally as beer into a plastic cup. Unlike Nathan, he could actually operate a smartphone without accidentally sending "u up?" to an ex from 2009, so with a few swipes he tracked down the ambulance paramedics.

Ten minutes later, the doors of the reception swung open again and in walked the medics, still in uniform, still looking like they weren't sure if this was a rescue or an afterparty. The guard slapped their backs, shoved them towards the buffet, and just like that the entire extended cast of Nathan's misadventures was reunited under the disco ball.

And something happened. Something Nathan always claimed *never* happened: everyone else slid seamlessly into pleasure. Anchorman was slow-dancing with a bridesmaid, cameraman was locked in tongue combat with a cousin, mic man was grinding with a groomsman. The guard was laughing into the paramedic's ear, while the *other* paramedic was already half undressed in the coatroom with someone whose name he didn't catch.

The party had turned feral, sweaty, and borderline biblical.

Except for Nathan.

As always.

He sat at the bar, knocking back bourbons with the mechanical efficiency of a factory pump, watching every body tangle with every other body while he remained untouched, the eternal wallflower, the dork and the nerd loser he'd always been.

Not tragic, not noble — just Nathan. Drinking the bar dry, in the vain hope that at the bottom of a bottle there'd be something warmer than whiskey.

Nathan, with all his discourse about old passions, about anal sex, about the secret arts of women over twenty-eight — was, in the end, still Nathan.

The last to be chosen.
The one told *no* even when the room had run out of *any* other option.
The witness to every friend getting laid, except him.
The eternal outpost, the last bastion of the friendzone frontier.

That Nathan.

And so he fell back into his one specialty, the only craft he'd perfected across decades of rejection and booze: drain the bar dry. No hope. No casual coupling, not for you, mate. Forget the music, forget the party, forget the slow grinding and kisses in

corners. Your life is shit, you are shit, and your consolation prize is the bottom of a glass.

So he poured bourbon into himself with a professional's touch, tossing in whatever pills he still had in his pocket. He imagined they were benzos, tranquilizers, psychotropics — real chemical artillery. In truth, they were pediatric vitamins. Vitamin C. Flintstones chewables. A half strip of kiddie Tylenol.

But Nathan didn't know. And that ignorance was the cherry on his drink: he was once more baffled by life, slugging vitamins with whiskey, waiting for oblivion, and getting only hydration and a mild boost to his immune system.

That was Nathan. Again.

Nathan (sits up straighter, voice half-slurred, half-earnest):
"My anger thins and with it comes the ache: the dream of love for me is almost outlawed. I don't

know how many I've loved, nor how many I've had; by my cock's fault or by fate's cruelty, I've lost them all.
When the weight of perpetual solitude presses, I lock the door and write — and through writing I console myself. Yet inside I still believe in great love: I love without sin, I love; and still I drown in despair."

(He lets the sentence hang, a smirk that's half defiance, half surrender. A napkin is folded around his trembling glass. The room is oddly still for a beat — then a cough, then someone clearing a throat. Nathan finishes, not looking for pity, only the truth that his mouth will give him.)

Nathan had two bottles going, pouring both streams straight into his mouth, rattling a couple of ice cubes in after, then shaking his head like a human cocktail shaker. His ancestral depression — the one about being useless in the dating and mating game — was gnawing him raw tonight, hunting him like a wolf that knew the trail too well.

He muttered aloud, the words coming smooth in English, faithful but aching:

“The women you will never have all resemble each other. They all share the same trick: they can fascinate you, but you can’t fascinate them. That’s the mechanism. That’s why you lose them irreparably.

Sometimes they’re as beautiful as a poppy on the roadside. You stop, you crouch, you lie on the ground to see it against the indigo sky. You want to stroke the grass around it. And in your mind’s eye, you see their breasts rising from the sheets of your bed, their hair a flag under the shower.

But none of this is for you. That’s their hallmark, the women you will never have: the one-way current of desire.

And the worst of it is—you don’t spot it straight away. If you did, you might duck the wave. But you don’t. You get caught. And the more impossible it

becomes, the more wondrous it seems. You let yourself sink into the honey of it, sticky, stupefied. And by the time you realize, it's too late. Only when the first splinter of ridicule drives itself into your brain do you get it: you've been hurling ripe figs against a wall. Nothing comes back.

And it couldn't be otherwise. Otherwise, they wouldn't be the women you will never have."

He drained both bottles, ice cubes clinking down his throat, and the room spun just enough to match the poetry.

"Fuck you, life," Nathan said, voice slurred but sharp enough to cut glass. "You never even give me an opportunity.

I'm not hunting right now, not chasing mating or coupling or whatever the glossy magazines call it. But that's only because I learned to resign myself against you. Somebody else always wins. Somebody

else always gets the prize, the girl, the opportunity, the thing or the thang. Always someone else.

So I resigned myself to not desiring. And that's why I keep barely existing. Because I expect failure. Because you, life, taught me so.

So much for that cliché about sitting on the bank of the river, waiting for the corpse of your enemy to float by. You know what you get, sitting on that riverbank? Mike from *Breaking Bad*, bleeding out in the reeds, sinking into the rivercanes. Yeah. That's what the riverbank gives you.

Fuck you, life."

He downed another pour, ice cubes rattling against his teeth, and let the silence answer back.

He hadn't noticed at first. The toddler returned like a small lord, shirt tucked, vest buttoned, tie askew—an antique in miniature. He tottered up with the

solemnity only a one-year-old can fake and peered at Nathan as if issuing a verdict.

Toddler (lisping, proud): “Well, look who’s crying against himself now.”

Nathan, bourbon haze and all, squinted and barked back: “Fuck you, little monster. You’re only wise because I lectured you about grown-up things a few hours ago. Kids at your age learn on a rocket curve.”

Toddler, wobbling like a ship in a bathtub: “Still—here I am, walking straight—” (loses balance, falls ass-first) “whoops. Anyway, here I am falling on my diaper. You’re falling on your pile of failures.”

Nathan: “Don’t you have somewhere better to be?”

Toddler (shoving a drooly fist in Nathan’s face): “Yeah, I have. But I’m not there, am I? I’m here to bother you.”

Nathan, delighted at the role: “I fart in your general direction.”

Toddler (unfazed): “What?”

Nathan: “Your mother is a hamster.”

Toddler (indignant): “She most certainly is not! She’s a very human being. She cuddled me a minute ago. Something you adults crave. So—more than you’ll ever see all night. No, month. No—the rest of your life!”

Nathan, petty as a god with no worshippers: “And your father smells of elderberries.”

Toddler: “He most certainly—wait. I don’t know what an elderberry is. Also, I’m not sure who my father is yet. Too busy recognizing mummy in a crowd. Can I see you closer? Are you my father?”

Nathan, mock-menacing, only half serious: “I should cut you a hand off with a light saber right now.”

Toddler (blank for a beat): “You… what? You shall not… naaah—” then erupts into full toddler meltdown, shrill and theatrical: “Waaah! Waaah!”

Nathan, never one for subtlety, grabbed the nearest spent ash from the fireplace — a motley clump of soot and ember dust — and flung it in a clumsy, defiant arc. The soot landed across the toddler's vest like a shabby crown. The kid gagged, coughed, then went quiet, bewildered into a new, grimy state.

Nathan rolled away toward the next room, an ash-baby halo in his wake.

Voice offstage (outrage, pitched high): "Who the hell covers a crying toddler in ash???"

Nathan, muffled as he disappears: "Artistic direction, darling. Consider it modern baptism."

Nathan didn't wait for the outraged voice to finish. He was already rolling into the next room, brushing soot off his trousers, scanning for the exit like a burglar who'd just robbed a nursery.

Past the coats, past the half-empty platters, through the kitchen where a cook froze with a ladle mid-air,

he muttered:
“Alright, life, you bastard. Next chapter. Next punishment.”

And just like that, he was outside. No plan, no map — just the streetlight glare and his liver screaming like a factory whistle.

On the curb, a taxi idled, the driver reading a newspaper like it was still 1973. Nathan climbed in uninvited, shoved a handful of coins and a vitamin gummy at the man, and slurred:
“Take me to destiny. Or the liquor store. Whichever’s closer.”

The cab rolled. Nathan leaned back, shirt half-open, tie strangling him like a bad decision. He didn’t know where he was headed, but the universe always had another farce waiting: a late-night karaoke bar, a police station lobby, a monastery that rented rooms.

Wherever it was, Nathan would arrive drunk, baffled, and narrating. Because that was the one thing he knew how to do: stagger into the next disaster, glass in hand, grin crooked, muttering, "Alright, what's next?"

The cabbie turned around to speak — or mumble — or maybe drool. Nathan blinked and realized it was Jack Nicholson in *Cuckoo's Nest*, post-lobotomy. Same dull glow of intelligence that had been evicted. Same eloquence: none. Same ability to drive: also none.

Nathan deadpanned:
"Oh, a vegan cab ride. A vegetable at the wheel."

Rimshot. Applause.

Two spotlights blasted on. The cab interior melted, became stage furniture. Nathan was still in the backseat, but now it was a sofa set beside a desk. Across from him sat Will Sampson, feathered hair,

dressed as Johnny Carson in a powder-blue blazer. Ribbon mic gleaming, mug sweating.

Will Sampson, smooth as smoke:
“Ladies and gentlemen, Nathan Rawls for you all! Welcome back to the show, Nathan. How did you find your dressing room?”

Nathan tipped an imaginary fedora, lounging back:
“Oh easy, it was just where I left it last time.”

Rimshot. Applause.

Sampson leaned in, shuffling index cards he hadn’t read.
“You’ve been busy lately. Ashing toddlers, confusing paramedics, dodging weddings. Tell us, Nathan — is this all rehearsal, or is it the main event?”

Nathan swirled his bourbon, ice cubes clinking like a laugh track:
“Buddy, when the script’s this bad, you stop rehearsing. You just bomb live.”

Rimshot. Applause. A tuba honks from the band.

Sampson (shuffling his cue cards, grinning big-teeth TV style):
“Nathan, you’re one of a kind. You’re the negative copy of Dolly Parton: everybody can rain shit on you.”

Nathan, leaning into the mic, bourbon breath warming the ribbon:
“Oh, believe me, you can say some pretty bad things about Dolly too — especially if she’s just crushed your foot under her seven-inch heels.”

Third spotlight explodes to life.
And there she is: Dolly Parton herself, perched right beside Nathan on the backseat-turned-sofa, glitter dress throwing prisms into the studio haze. Her heel — indeed seven inches of rhinestone fury — is theatrically planted on Nathan’s shoe, perfectly framed for the cameras.

Nathan (deadpan, with mock solemnity):
“Hey Dolly, I’m sorry for putting my foot under yours.”

Rimshot. Applause. Band kicks in a steel-guitar flourish. Dolly winks at the audience, Nathan winces but milks the pain for timing.

Dolly (reaching behind the seats like a magician pulling a rabbit): “Nathan, honey, when I knew you’d be on the show, I could only think about dedicating this new version of my oldie for you.”

She produces a rhinestone-studded acoustic from nowhere, acrylic talons glittering under the lights as she starts picking with impossible precision. The band hushes; a single spotlight hits her hair like sunrise over Dollywood.

♫ *Bittersweet memories*
That’s all I’m taking with me…

(Nathan does giant, fake puppy-dog eyes at the camera.)

♫ *Goodbye, please don't cry…*

(Nathan mimes dabbing tears with his sleeve, quivering lower lip for the audience.)

♫ *We both know that I'm not what you need…*

(Nathan drops the act, gives the camera his patented *nigga-please* look, eyebrow cocked.)

Dolly leans into the mic for the new chorus, her voice rising like gospel:

♫ *But I-II-III will always see-you-as-a-frieeeeeeend…*
I will always frieeeeeeendzone youuuuuuuuuu!

Rimshot. Applause. The band hits a triumphant chord. Confetti cannons go off for no reason.

Nathan just sits there with Dolly's heel still on his shoe, torn between laughing, crying, and pouring another drink. The audience goes wild, half from the performance, half from the sheer cruelty of the lyric rewrite.

Sampson, behind the desk, raises his mug, deadpan: "Ladies and gentlemen, the Queen herself. And the man she just friend-zoned live on air."

Cue laugh track, cut to commercial.

📺 **This episode of *The Nathan Rawls Show* was brought to you by:**
Tramadol, Ambien, Xanax, and whatever other shit Nathan stuffed down his face.
(Actual ingredients may include pediatric vitamins and gummy bears.)

🎬 Cast (in order of appearance on the prescription pad)

- **Fluoxetine (Prozac)** … *The Cheerleader* pom-poms optional
- **Sertraline (Zoloft)** … *The Reliable Friend* who never misses carpool
- **Escitalopram (Lexapro)** … *The Minimalist* Marie Kondo'd serotonin
- **Paroxetine (Paxil)** … *The Clinger* won't let you ghost her
- **Citalopram (Celexa)** … *The Forgotten Twin* ("Wait, who?")
- **Venlafaxine (Effexor)** … *The Mood Elevator with a Dark Side* basement button stuck
- **Duloxetine (Cymbalta)** … *The Painkiller's Cousin* crashing on the couch
- **Bupropion (Wellbutrin)** … *The Energizer Bunny* vibrates through walls
- **Lithium** … *The Ancient Godfather* mumbles in Latin, runs the family
- **Valproate (Depakote)** … *The Heavyweight* eats steel for breakfast
- **Lamotrigine (Lamictal)** … *The Gentle Mood Stabilizer* hugs your neurons

- Carbamazepine (Tegretol) … *The Old Warhorse* still wearing its WWII helmet
- Olanzapine (Zyprexa) … *The Weight Gainer* comes with fries
- Risperidone (Risperdal) … *The Middle Manager* writes memos to dopamine
- Quetiapine (Seroquel) … *The Sleepy One* snores through the credits
- Aripiprazole (Abilify) … *The Partial Agonist (wink wink)* half-assing in style
- Clozapine (Clozaril) … *The Nuclear Option* requires a hazmat suit
- Diazepam (Valium) … *The Chill Uncle* smokes at weddings
- Lorazepam (Ativan) … *The Panic Button* glass case included
- Alprazolam (Xanax) … *The Pop Star* always trending
- Clonazepam (Klonopin) … *The Long Haul* packs snacks
- Methylphenidate (Ritalin) … *The Overachiever* color-coded planner

- **Amphetamine salts (Adderall)** ⋯ *The Party-School Valedictorian* keg stand at 8, finals at 9
- **Modafinil (Provigil)** ⋯ *The Hacker's Secret* caffeine's edgy cousin
- **Haloperidol (Haldol)** ⋯ *The Old School Enforcer* cracks knuckles, no jokes
- **Chlorpromazine (Thorazine)** ⋯ *The Original Heavy Sedative* still stuck in 1954
- **Ketamine / Esketamine** ⋯ *The Psychedelic Cameo* galloping horse noises
- **Psilocybin** ⋯ *The Indie Darling* festival-only, limited run
- **MDMA (in trials)** ⋯ *The Hug Machine* breaks the fourth wall to kiss the audience

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🎶 **[Theme music swells, Dolly strums a final chord, Sampson waves to the crowd, Nathan face-down in the sofa/bar/cab hybrid set.]**

Voiceover:
“Stay tuned for next week’s episode: Nathan Rawls versus the toddlers’ union. Same bourbon time, same bourbon channel.”

🎶 [Commercial Jingle Begins]
It was an itsy, bitsy, teenie, weenie, yellow polka dot bikini…

The screen floods with pastel colors, dancing cartoon bikinis, beach balls bouncing in slow motion. A fake sunscreen bottle smiles at the camera.

[Record scratch.]
The music warps, slows, bassline drops an octave.

FADE TO BLACK.

White letters burn onto the screen:

“Fade to Paedophilia.”

The cheerful ukulele cuts. Gregorian chant rises in its place.

And then, in all its uninvited glory:

ON SCREEN — giant serif letters, solemn:
The Catholic Church